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ABSTRACT

This report examines students', teachers', and parents' reactions to standardized testing and whether the move to raise academic standards has improved the quality of college students and new employees. It is based on telephone interviews conducted in late 2001 with a national and random sample of 600 K-12 public-school teachers, 610 parents of public-school students, 600 public-school students in either middle or high school, 251 employers, and 252 college professors. The survey found that as students nationwide face more testing and higher hurdles for promotion and graduation, few of them seem apprehensive about school or unnerved by the testing. Even as standards are being raised, many students say they could work harder in school, and many say their classmates often get diplomas without having learned what was expected. Additionally, there is broad agreement that local schools are moving in the right direction on standards and that testing has genuine benefits. But even with higher academic standards taking root and teachers and parents reporting notable changes in policies on testing, promotion, and summer school, many employers and professors say that too many of today's high-school graduates lack basic skills. Overall, the standards movement continues to attract widespread support among teachers and parents, and students appear to be adjusting to the new status quo. (RJM)

Public Agenda: Reality Check 2002.

Jean Johnson
Ann Duffett

March 6, 2002

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SPECIAL REPORT



PUBLIC AGENDA

Reality Check 2002

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A progress report on raising standards shows few students unsettled by testing and continued support for such efforts among teachers, parents, and students.

Since 1998, Public Agenda has annually surveyed public school students, teachers, and parents, along with employers and college professors, to help gauge the nation's progress in raising academic standards. The surveys ask students, teachers, and parents about expectations, testing, promotion, and graduation in their own schools, and they ask employers and professors for their perceptions about the skills of young people entering the workforce and higher education. This year, despite some headlines trumpeting a "backlash to testing," *Reality Check* shows strong agreement on the useful role standardized tests can play, and a broad consensus on how they should be used.

A Changing Educational Landscape

The drive to raise academic standards in public schools has enjoyed broad political backing at the national, state, and local

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Reality Check, a joint project of Public Agenda and *Education Week*, is the annual report on the progress of the academic-standards movement and the impact of reform efforts on schools and the work world as seen from the perspectives of education's key stakeholders. The Pew Charitable Trusts and the GE Fund provide support for the project.

The four previous editions of *Reality Check* appeared in *Education Week* on Feb. 21, 2001, Feb. 16, 2000, Jan. 11, 1999 (*Quality Counts 1999*), and Jan. 8, 1998 (*Quality Counts 1998*).

Public Agenda, a nonprofit, nonpartisan research organization based in New York City, designed the surveys on which this report is based and provided this summary of the findings.

The report was written by Jean Johnson and Ann Duffett.

More findings from the *Reality Check* surveys are available online at www.edweek.org and www.publicagenda.org.

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levels. Both Republican and Democratic leaders have endorsed the concept, and all 50 states employ testing to some degree to determine what students are learning. A key component of President Bush's "No Child Left Behind" Act, passed in January of this year, requires states to phase in statewide annual testing in reading and mathematics for

Basic Skills Still Troublesome

But this year's surveys also contain some less welcome news for standards proponents. Based on reports from teachers, parents, and students, the impact of higher academic standards on promotion and graduation policies has been mixed. Employers and professors also continue

FINDING 1:

Even as students nationwide face more testing and higher hurdles for promotion and graduation, very few seem apprehensive about school or unnerved by what is currently being asked of them.

Very few students said they see public middle and high school as a grueling academic pressure cooker.

grades 3 through 8 by the 2005-06 school year.

According to *Reality Check 2002*, the standards movement continues to attract widespread support among teachers and parents, and public school students nationwide appear to be adjusting comfortably to the new status quo.

to voice considerable dissatisfaction with high school graduates' basic skills.

In this progress report, we lay out the chief findings from the fifth annual *Reality Check* surveys. Complete results for all surveys from 1998 through 2002 will be available from Public Agenda in a technical report to be released later this year.

Based on Public Agenda's survey of 600 public middle and high school students, very few of the nation's students experience school as a grueling academic pressure cooker. Eight in 10 (82 percent) say academic expectations in their own schools are "about right;" just 11 percent say students are expected to learn "too much." Seven in 10 students say the amount of homework they get (71 percent) and the number of tests they take (71 percent) are also about right.

Taking Tests in Stride

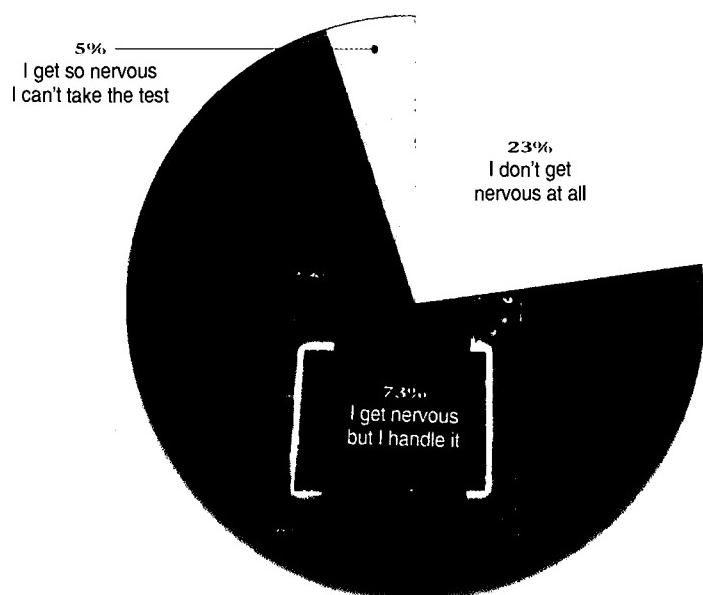
Although some educators have raised concerns about whether increased standardized testing is placing undue pressure on students, *Reality Check* picks up little evidence of strain. Virtually all students say that they take standardized tests seriously; 56 percent say they take them "very seriously." At the same time, however, most also seem to be taking the tests in stride. Twenty-three percent say they don't get nervous at all; 73 percent say they get nervous but can handle it. Only a handful of students (5 percent) say they "get so nervous" that they can't take the tests.

Some educators also voice fears that test preparation and "teaching to the test" may drive out other important elements of education, and a large majority of students (80 percent) do report that teachers spend class time preparing for upcoming standardized tests. Still, almost eight in 10 (78 percent) say that their teachers do not take so much time that they neglect other important topics.

As for the tests themselves, over half of teenagers (53 percent) say that most of the tests they take consist only of multiple-choice questions; 44 percent say their tests include writing and explaining their answers. Almost eight in 10 of the

STUDENTS TAKE TESTS IN STRIDE

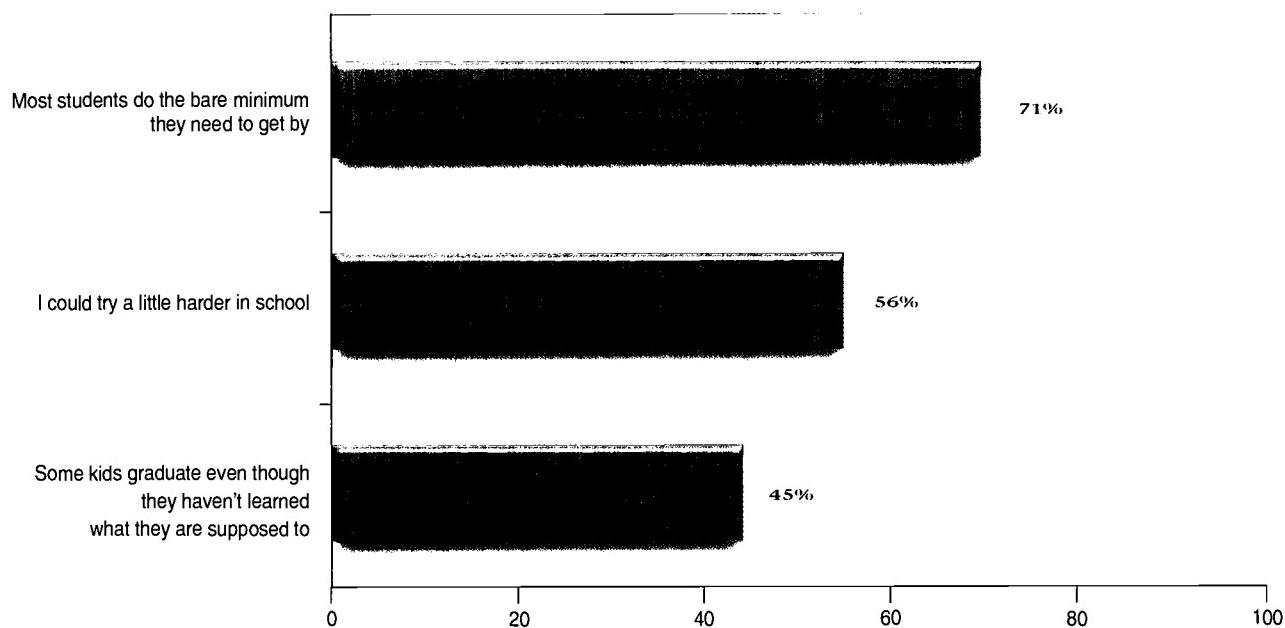
Which best describes how nervous you get when you take standardized tests?



SOURCE: Public Agenda, *Reality Check 2002*

STUDENTS GET BY WITH LITTLE EFFORT

Percent of students who say:



SOURCE: Public Agenda, *Reality Check 2002*

students (79 percent) say they think standardized-test questions are generally fair.

Too Much Emphasis on Scores?

Even so, some evidence suggests that all the talk about testing is affecting at least some students. A sizeable number (45 percent) do believe that their schools place too much emphasis on standardized-test scores. And they do have distinct views on how these tests should be used: Most (62 percent) say it would be wrong to use the results of just one test as a basis for promotion or graduation. As we will see in subsequent findings, strong majorities of the adults surveyed agree. *Reality Check* does show, however, that it's very unusual for schools to base promotion or graduation solely on standardized-test scores.

FINDING 2:

Even as standards are being

raised nationwide, many students say they could work harder in school, and many say classmates often get diplomas without having learned what was expected.

In a landmark study of the American workforce, social scientist and Public Agenda founder Daniel Yankelovich

that could enhance U.S. competitiveness worldwide.

Getting By

Reality Check 2002 suggests that many American middle and high school students could devote a substantial amount of discretionary effort to study-

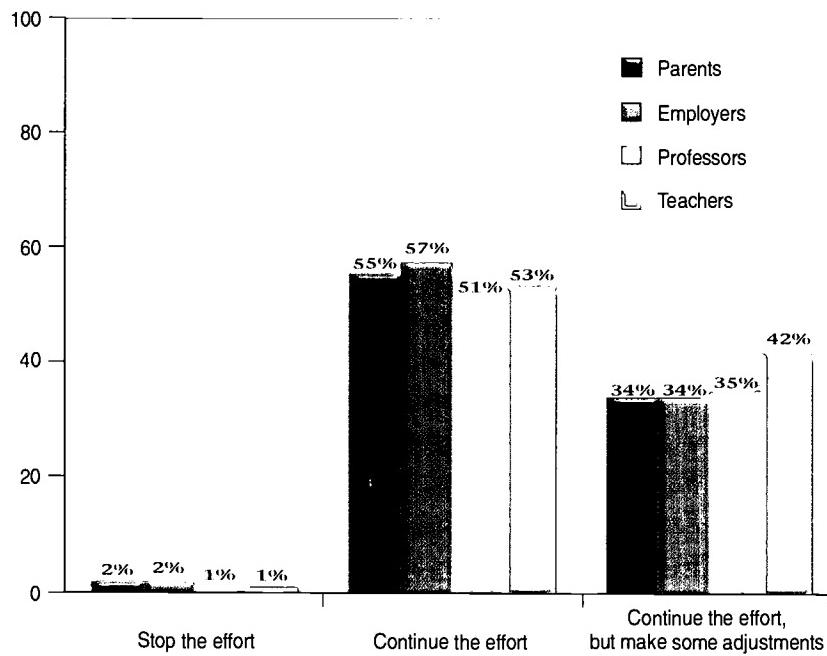
While virtually all students say they take standardized testing "seriously," most seem to be keeping assessments in perspective.

coined the term "discretionary effort" to describe the added energy and commitment employees can give to their jobs if they want, versus the minimum effort they need to invest to avoid being fired.¹ Yankelovich saw this "discretionary effort" as an untapped resource, one

ing if they decided it was worth their while. According to students, getting by with as little effort as possible is still the modus operandi in public schools. Seventy-one percent agree that "most students do the bare minimum they need to get by." Even more

VERY LITTLE BACKLASH

What should your school district do when it comes to the effort toward higher standards?

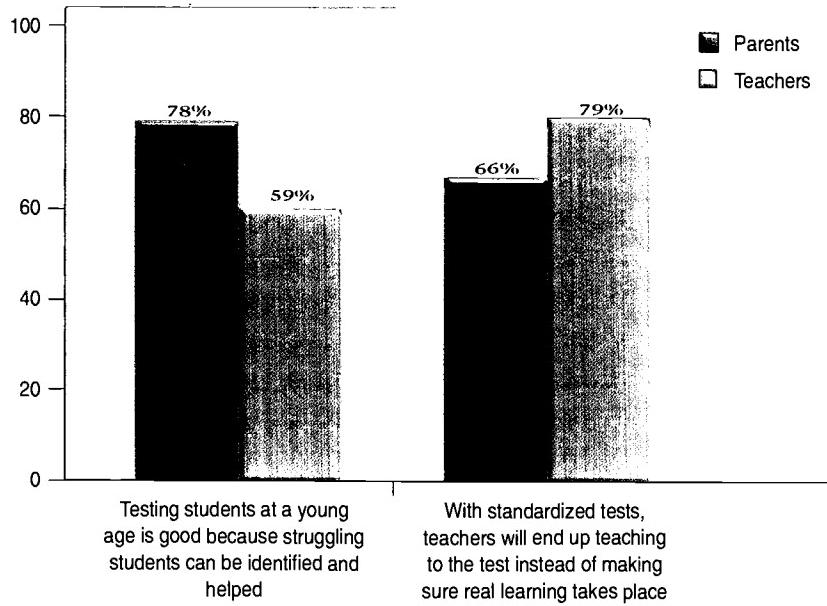


Base: Those who say their school district is making an effort to raise standards

SOURCE: Public Agenda, *Reality Check 2002*

MINDFUL OF TESTING'S PROS AND CONS

Percent of parents and teachers who say:



SOURCE: Public Agenda, *Reality Check 2002*

important, perhaps, over half of students (56 percent) say that they themselves "could try a little harder" in school. Forty-five percent say that they are already trying their best to do well in school.

Other findings suggest that large holes exist in the standards net. Not only do many students admit that they and their classmates could work harder, many also say that it is still possible to get a high school diploma without having strong academic skills. Nearly half (45 percent) say "some kids graduate from my school even though they haven't learned what they are supposed to." And in a recent Public Agenda survey, nearly four in 10 high school students (37 percent) – and almost half of high school teachers (46 percent) and parents (44 percent) – reported that their schools have a serious problem with too many students who get passed through the system without learning.²

FINDING 3:

Broad agreement exists that local schools are moving in the right direction on standards, and that testing has genuine benefits. No evidence points to a broad backlash against higher academic standards among any of the groups surveyed.

Public school students may voice relatively little dismay over increased testing, but this does not mean that the topic has not been hotly debated in some communities. Yet, despite several widely publicized anti-testing protests in recent years, *Reality Check* continues to show a strong consensus among parents, teachers, employers, and college professors that changes in their own districts' policies have been positive ones and that standardized tests have important benefits.

Few Would Turn Back the Clock

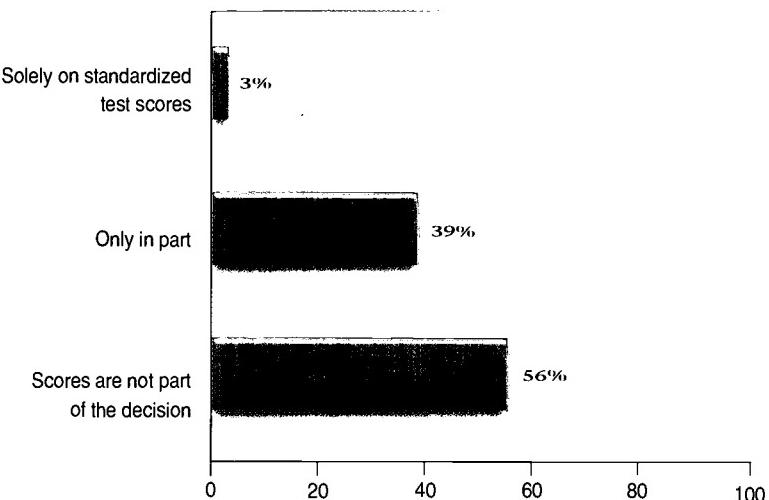
Just as it did last year, *Reality Check* picks up virtually no support for returning

to the days before the "standards movement" began. Among those who know that their districts are raising standards, only 2 percent of parents, 1 percent of teachers, 2 percent of employers, and 1 percent of professors say local schools should discontinue their current efforts and go back to the way things were. In fact, great majorities of all the adult groups say that their own districts have been "careful and reasonable" in their efforts to raise standards.

Not only are most parents, teachers, employers, and professors comfortable with the overall drive to raise standards, few take serious issue with the concept of standardized testing. As we reported in Finding 1, a large majority of students accept standardized testing as fair and reasonable. Equally large numbers of adults also give testing a general thumbs-up.

FEW DISTRICTS USE TEST SCORES TO DECIDE PROMOTION

Percent of teachers who say students at their schools are promoted:



SOURCE: Public Agenda, *Reality Check 2002*

Basic Skills at Least

Very large majorities of parents (85 percent), teachers (75 percent), employers (79 percent), and professors (79 percent) say that students work harder if they know that they will have to pass a test for promotion or graduation. Most parents

ents (54 percent) and teachers (58 percent) say such a test should focus on basic skills, but almost a third of parents (32 percent) and 21 percent of teachers say it should cover even higher skills. Just 12 percent of parents and 20 percent of teachers say it's "a bad idea" to

emphasis" is placed on test scores today, and sizeable percentages of parents (60 percent), employers (52 percent), and professors (57 percent) agree.

Large majorities of parents (66 percent), teachers (79 percent), employers (64 percent), and professors (79 percent) also say "teachers will end up teaching to the test instead of making sure real learning takes place." Still, these concerns do not seem to undercut an overall comfort level with testing. Even teachers, by far the group voicing the most concern, are largely untroubled by testing's impact in their own classrooms. Just 26 percent of teachers say that they themselves focus so much on test preparation that real learning is neglected; 73 percent say this is not currently the case in their own classrooms.

Most are comfortable with the overall drive to raise standards, and few take serious issue with the concept of standardized testing.

(78 percent) and teachers (59 percent) approve of testing younger students as a good way to identify those who need special help early on. Majorities of teachers (62 percent), employers (79 percent), and professors (78 percent) also say "standardized-test scores are a good way to spot struggling students who need tutoring or summer school." Most parents (61 percent) and teachers (55 percent) believe that students generally take the right number of tests.

Parents and teachers both endorse the idea of a high school exit exam. Most par-

require high school students to pass a test in order to get a diploma.

Recognizing the Downsides Of Testing

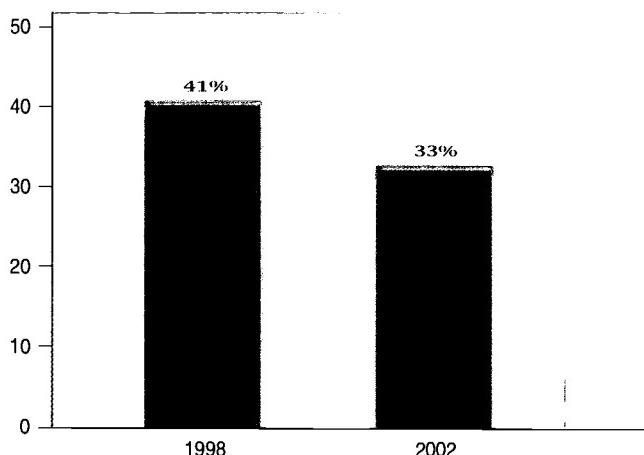
In a variety of circumstances, all of these groups say, testing can be useful. Nevertheless, none of the groups surveyed is oblivious to the downsides, nor do they reject all of the arguments the critics of testing make. Eighty-four percent of teachers say "far too much

Unfair, But Rare

It is also important to recognize that the strong overall support for testing does not mean that these groups give districts carte blanche on how tests are used. Very large majorities of parents (75 percent), teachers (89 percent), employers (81 percent), and professors (83 percent) say it would be "wrong to use the results of just one test to decide whether a student gets

GOOD NEWS: SOCIAL PROMOTION IS IN DECLINE

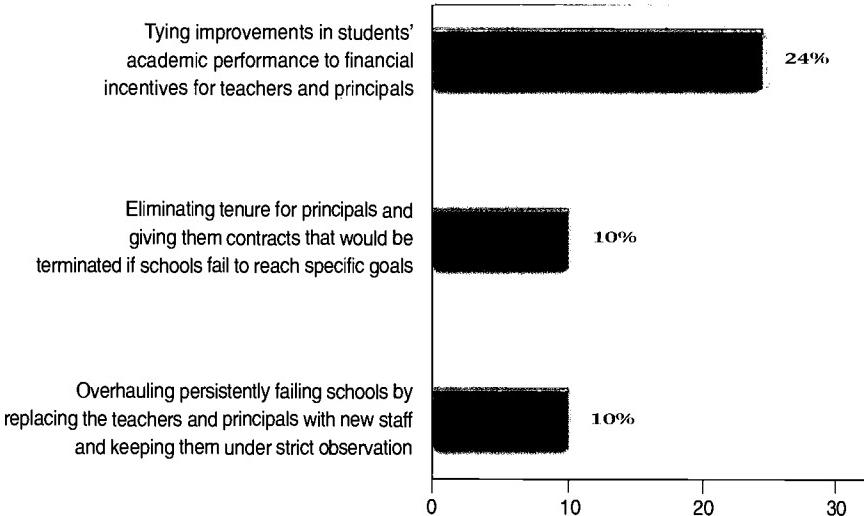
Percent of teachers who say their schools automatically promote students who have reached a maximum age:



SOURCE: Public Agenda, *Reality Check* 2002

MANY ACCOUNTABILITY MEASURES STILL FAIRLY UNUSUAL

Percent of teachers who say the following has happened in their school districts:



SOURCE: Public Agenda, *Reality Check* 2002

promoted or graduates."

Similarly large numbers – parents (78 percent), teachers (91 percent), employers (71 percent), and professors (76 percent) – say “it’s not fair to put so much pressure on students based on the results of one test.” And at least eight in 10 – parents (83 percent), teachers (80 percent), employers (86 percent), and professors (82 percent) – agree that “schools should use standardized-test scores along with teacher evaluations” to decide if students are ready to move ahead.

Interestingly, *Reality Check* continues to show that the policies these groups so strongly reject are, in fact, rare. Just 3 percent of teachers report that students in their schools are promoted based solely on standardized-test scores. In fact, over half of teachers (56 percent) report that test scores are not even considered in promotion decisions, while the remainder (39 percent) say they are used “only in part.”

FINDING 4:

Higher academic standards are taking root, and teachers and parents report notable changes in policies on testing, promotion, and summer school. Even so, some reforms sought by standards advocates remain more discussed than acted on.

For the first time since it began in 1998, last year’s *Reality Check* reported some significant changes in the way public schools deal with standards and accountability issues. Based on *Reality Check*’s surveys of parents, teachers, and students, key policies on testing, promotion, and summer school are being slowly recast, and they are changing in precisely the way many standards advocates would hope.

Still, public schools are hardly caught up in whirlwinds of change, and some hotly debated accountability measures are still the exception rather than the rule.

More Summer School

For example, the percentage of elementary school parents who say their

children must pass a basic-skills test before moving on to middle school has grown from 48 percent to 58 percent in the past two years. The percentage of teachers who report increasing summer school attendance in their schools has risen from 28 percent in 1998 to 40 percent today. More teachers also say that students take summer school seriously, a figure that has grown from 43 percent in 1998 to 55 percent today.

The data show that the practice of social promotion, a particular *bête noir* for many standards advocates, is in decline. In 1998, 41 percent of teachers reported that their own schools had such a policy (defined in *Reality Check* as "automatically promoting students who have reached a maximum age"). Today that number is at 33 percent.

At the same time, other indicators show virtually no change. The number of middle school parents who say their children must pass a basic-skills test to enter high school continues to hover at the six-in-10 mark. It was 57 percent the first time the question was asked in 2000, and 62 percent today. The roughly half of high school students who say that their schools require them to pass an exit exam to graduate also remains virtually unchanged since the question was first asked three years ago (52 percent in 1999 and 49 percent in 2002).

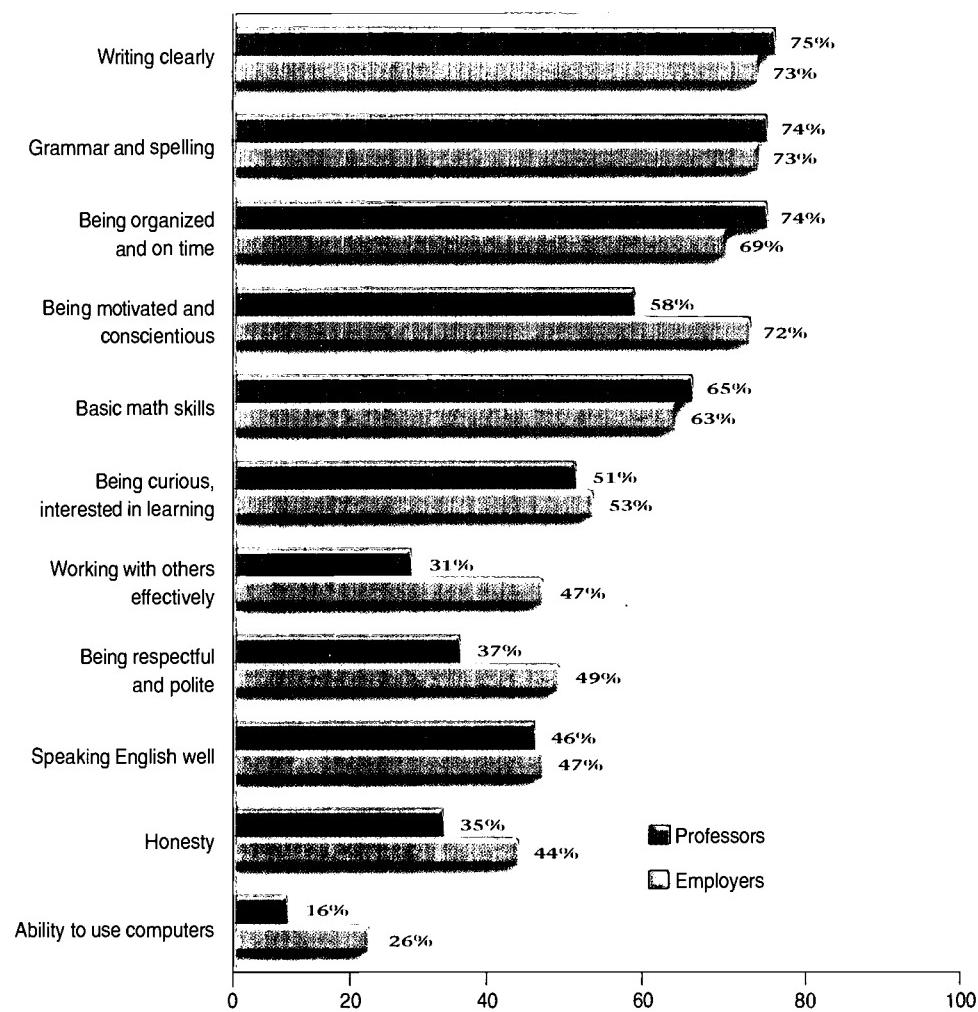
More Bark Than Bite?

Most of the standards initiatives enacted so far set guidelines for what students should learn, test youngsters to see if they have done so, and revamp promotion and graduation policies to coincide with these changes. But another important goal among some advocates is establishing more accountability for schools and educators themselves, that is, making sure that schools, principals, and teachers have concrete incentives to help children learn more. For example, the "No Child Left Behind" Act orders stiff penalties for schools that fail to raise student achievement, including the reconstitution of some troubled schools and the replacement of their staffs.

Though discussed widely among educators, measures of this kind are still

EMPLOYERS AND PROFESSORS REMAIN DISSATISFIED WITH BASIC SKILLS

Percent giving recent high school graduates "poor" or "fair" ratings on:



SOURCE: Public Agenda, *Reality Check 2002*

fairly unusual, according to *Reality Check*. About a quarter of teachers (24 percent) say their districts have a policy that ties educator pay to improvements in student achievement. Just 10 percent of teachers say their districts tie principal contracts to progress in schools, and just 10 percent of teachers report that their districts contain a persistently failing school that has been overhauled by replacing staff members and closely monitoring subsequent progress.

FINDING 5:

Employers and professors still say that too many of today's high school graduates lack basic skills, although both groups continue to give young people high marks on computer skills.

Since *Reality Check* was launched, its surveys have revealed a profound dissatisfaction among local employers and pro-

fessors with the skills and attitudes of today's graduating public high school students. These lackluster ratings have remained essentially unchanged since 1998, and, perhaps ironically, the most serious criticisms employers and professors make focus squarely on what many would consider the most basic elements of a general education.

Don't Know Much About . . .

For the fifth year in a row, more than seven in 10 employers and professors say the youngsters they see have just

Glimmers of Progress?

Indications are that professors in particular are beginning to give local schools more credit for their efforts to raise standards. The number of professors who say that local schools expect students to learn "too little" has steadily fallen from 66 percent in 1998 to 47 percent today, a significant drop of 19 points. For employers also, the data suggest a downward trend, from 55 percent in 1998 to 48 percent today. Both groups are more likely to give their local public schools higher ratings overall than they were four years ago. In 1998, only 31

skills are actually a low priority in schools of education. While 84 percent of education professors said that it is absolutely essential for teaching programs to encourage teachers to be "life-long learners" themselves, just 19 percent said it was absolutely essential to produce teachers who "stress correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation" for their students.⁴

Methodology

Telephone interviews were conducted Nov. 9 through Dec. 9, 2001, with national, random samples of 600 K-12 public school teachers; 610 parents of public school students in grades K-12; 600 public school students in middle or high school; 251 employers who make hiring decisions for employees recently out of high school or college; and 252 professors at two- and four-year colleges who taught freshmen or sophomores in the past two years. The margin of error for teachers, parents, and students is plus or minus 4 percentage points; for employers and professors, plus or minus 6 percentage points. ■

For the fifth year in a row, employers expressed disappointment with the skills of graduating high school students.

fair or poor skills in grammar and spelling (73 percent of employers; 74 percent of professors) and in their ability to write clearly (73 percent of employers; 75 percent of professors). And more than six in 10 say young graduates' skills are just fair or poor in basic math (63 percent of employers; 65 percent of professors).

Both groups also voice serious concerns about what they see as a lack of diligence among youngsters coming into their workplaces and classrooms. Sixty-nine percent of employers and 74 percent of professors give young people fair or poor ratings for "work habits, such as being organized and on time." Majorities also give students low marks for "being motivated and conscientious" (72 percent of employers; 58 percent of professors).

As earlier editions of *Reality Check* have shown, the employer and professor ratings are not a blanket condemnation of young people's skills, and computers continue to be the bright spot. Seventy percent of employers and 81 percent of college professors rate the computer skills of the high school graduates they come in contact with as excellent or good.

percent in each group said their schools were doing an excellent or good job. In 2002, that proportion has increased to 42 percent of employers and 39 percent of professors.

Despite these glimmers of hope, the high levels of dissatisfaction among employers and professors—who are in many ways the ultimate consumers of K-12 education—are disheartening. Since standards reforms take time to take effect, it is possible that these groups are not yet encountering the better-prepared students coming through the pipeline.

But Can They Spell?

It is also possible that disagreements over the importance of such skills as grammar, spelling, punctuation, and basic math are a stumbling block.

Very large majorities of employers and professors cite these skills as key concerns. And in a recent study of high school teachers, just 20 percent said that students in their schools typically "learn to speak and write well, with proper pronunciation and grammar."³

But findings from other Public Agenda research suggest that these

¹"Putting the Work Ethic to Work: A Public Agenda Report on Restoring America's Competitive Vitality," 1983.

²"Sizing Things Up: What Parents, Teachers, and Students Think About Large and Small High Schools," Public Agenda, 2002.

³"Sizing Things Up: What Parents, Teachers, and Students Think About Large and Small High Schools," Public Agenda, 2002.

⁴"Different Drummers: How Teachers of Teachers View Public Education," Public Agenda, 1997.

For more information on this or other Public Agenda research, visit Public Agenda Online at www.publicagenda.org. In-depth information, including survey findings, news digests, and trend data, is available on education and nearly two dozen other public-policy issues.



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